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Qaddafi Rival Spurns CIA Overtures

The Central Intelligence Agency is backing the wrong man in what appears to be an illegal effort to overthrow Libyan dictator Col. Muammar Qaddafi. But the agency really doesn't have much choice; the right man turned it down.

Despite an executive order that seems to forbid it, the CIA trained and supported the National Front for the Salvation of Libya before, during and after its attempt to assassinate Qaddafi on May 8, 1984.

The anti-Qaddafi group was slaughtered in a day-long battle less than a mile from the barracks where the dictator was holed up behind Soviet-made tanks and antiaircraft guns.

The coup attempt was doomed before it started. Two days before the Tripoli battle, the Salvation Front's top military man had been captured near the Tunisian border. But the group's leader, Mohammed Youssef Magarieff, went ahead with the operation to show his CIA and Saudi Arabian backers what they had bought with \$7 million in funding.

The anti-Qaddafi exile the CIA should be backing—and in fact wants to—is Abdel Moneim al-Huni, one of the original 12 army officers who helped Qaddafi seize power in 1969. As vice president, interior minister and counterintelligence chief in the early years, al-Huni was Qaddafi's No. 3 man.

But by 1975, he had become disgusted with the corruption of the revolutionary regime and with Qaddafi's treatment of dissidents and minorities.

Barring a Soviet-backed coup, al-Huni is the man most likely to succeed Qaddafi, whose overthrow

seems more likely almost by the hour. Probably for that reason, al-Huni shuns any connection, or perceived connection, with the CIA. The merest hint of CIA support could destroy him politically.

By our own count, there are at least two dozen groups and prominent individuals who would like to see Qaddafi ousted. They include leftists, rightists, monarchists and Islamic fanatics, yet al-Huni appears to be acceptable to all of them. He is now the leader of a coalition being formed.

A soft-spoken, affable and unpretentious man, al-Huni has lived quietly in Cairo since 1975. An unsuccessful coup that year in Tripoli made him fear he was under suspicion by Qaddafi, according to a secret CIA report. So he decided to stay in Egypt.

In addition to his high standing with exile groups, al-Huni also worries Qaddafi because of his close ties to a key faction of the 60-member Free Officers organization set up by Qaddafi to run the Libyan government.

Inevitably, the dictator tried to have his dangerous rival eliminated. According to a CIA report, on March 6, 1976, three hit men armed with guns and grenades boarded a plane in Cairo on which al-Huni had booked passage to Rome. Fortunately for al-Huni (and the plane's passengers), he switched planes "after being advised to do so by Egyptian authorities as a precautionary measure," according to the CIA report. There have been no attempts on al-Huni since then, but as he begins to speak out against Qaddafi al-Huni will doubtless become a target again.